‘At Its Heart, a Haunted Town’: Patriarchal Violence, Female Resistance, and Post-Trauma in *Riverdale*

Raechel Dumas, San Diego State University

Introduction

Violence forms the fabric of a large body of recent television offerings, providing audiences a virtually limitless selection of dark content. One title in this vein is *Riverdale*, an ongoing series that first aired on The CW in 2017, and which features an ensemble cast based on characters from the Archie Comics universe. *Riverdale* opens in the wake of a shocking murder that fractures this formerly idyllic community, and whose as-yet unidentified perpetrator remains at large. When the adults of the town fail to make meaningful progress toward restoring the status quo, the series’ teenaged protagonists endeavor to solve the murder only to be confronted by an ever more disturbing series of conspiracies, as well as an ever-ghastlier string of killings. Gradually, the plot of *Riverdale* unravels into an ever-accumulating series of violent eruptions—eruptions that, the teens discover, are masterminded not by monstrous outsiders, but rather by some of the most intimately familiar adults in their community. Thus, as their investigations proceed the teens also begin manifest their own open wounds: wounds that not only articulate the trauma of murder and its aftermath, but also attest to the more quotidian forms violence that are enacted and experienced, reiterated and remembered, across various paradigms of contemporary life. Moreover, these experiences of violence are inextricably linked by one central feature: their origins in male fantasies, and more specifically the impulse to shore up heteropatriarchal paradigms of identity and desire.

This analysis explores how *Riverdale* employs death and signifiers of death—corpses, uncanny visions, doppelgängers, monstrous murderers, and other Gothic trappings—to construct

a metaphor for patriarchal violence and its traumatizing outcomes. Engagement with the series' elaborate web of characters and plotlines is beyond the scope of a single essay; thus, this reading concentrates on three female characters—Cheryl Blossom, Betty Cooper, and Veronica Lodge—who are pitted against the death-oriented patriarchs (and their representatives) who haunt *Riverdale* from its pilot episode through the conclusion of its third season. It considers how *Riverdale* explores patriarchal violence both at the level of narrative and through generic and aesthetic experimentation, the use of non-diegetic (extra-narrative) audiovisual effects, and allusions (references) to other narratives of patriarchal violence. In the process, it elaborates how the series discloses and navigates one of trauma's central paradoxes: the impossibility and the imperative of its representation. It considers also how the body in *Riverdale* acts as a vehicle of resistance: a site where patriarchal violence is inscribed but might also be mobilized toward alternative forms of identity negotiation and interconnection, and toward arousing in the viewer a desire to participate in the radical work of witnessing.

In the Beginning, a Corpse

The pilot episode of *Riverdale* is haunted by the disappearance of beloved local teenager and Riverdale High School quarterback Jason Blossom. A gruesome reality comes to light when his body is discovered on a riverbank with a bullet through its head. Here the meaning of the opening lines of the pilot, in which Jughead (a character whose melodramatic narrative voice frames the series) introduces the audience to Riverdale, becomes abundantly clear: 'From a distance, it presents itself like so many other small towns all over the world: safe, decent, innocent,' he explains. 'Get closer, though, and you start seeing the shadows underneath' ('On the River's Edge'). In this way, *Riverdale* frames its setting as the scene not only of an isolated

murder, but also of a grander fissure: a site where sinister realities threaten to permeate the idyllic fiction of small-town life.

From the outset then, *Riverdale* establishes its traumatic orientation by foreshadowing the eruption of the repressed onto the surface of culture. In this way, the series embeds itself in what Freud (2003, 132), writing on the uncanny, describes as 'everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open'. As Freud (2003, 124) explains, the uncanny is not frightening by virtue of its unfamiliarity; rather, it is 'that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar'. He elaborates with reference to infantile complexes: e.g., the Oedipal crimes of hatred for the father and desire for the mother, drives that are repressed as the child matures to produce an antithesis 'between the ego and whatever is unconscious' (Freud, 2003, 161). The uncanny emerges when, in adulthood, that which has been repressed approaches the conscious mind: 'Everything we now find "uncanny" meets the criterion that is linked with these remnants of animistic mental activity and stimulates them to express themselves' (Freud, 2003, LII). According to Freud (2003), the return of the repressed might produce any number of uncanny 'symptoms': among them, 'anxiety' (especially concerning the eyes) (140), 'the double' (141), 'the constant recurrence of the same thing, the repetition of the same facial features, the same characters, the same destinies' (142), 'the boundary between reality and fantasy is blurred' (150), and 'the false semblance of death and the raising of the dead' (153).

While Freud formulates his account with reference to childhood psychosexual development, the uncanny has been widely used (including by Freud himself) to explore how trauma is remembered, (re)experienced, and represented in personal, communal, and artistic contexts. For the purposes of this analysis, of particular interest is the relationship between

trauma, the uncanny, and the Gothic—the latter of which is a genre to which *Riverdale* is deeply indebted. Writing on narrating trauma, Cathy Caruth (2016, 4) observes that 'trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available'. Drawing on the work of Jean-François Lyotard, Roger Luckhurst (2008, 81) likewise emphasizes the paradox of traumatic representation, noting that traumatic memory resists the logical schema of chronological narration, and instead 'persists in a half-life, *rather like a ghost*, a haunting absent presence of another time in our time'. This is not to suggest that trauma altogether eludes expression; it is to say, however, that artworks that attempt to 'bear witness to the unrepresentable' tend to take on a spectral quality, one that is 'experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions' (Luckhurst, 2008, 81). With reference to the fiction of Stephen King (whose work will become relevant later in this essay), Luckhurst underscores the suitability of the Gothic, with its uncanny architecture and haunting affects, for engaging traumatic memory: 'Trauma psychology frequently resorts to the Gothic or supernatural to articulate post-traumatic effects' (Luckhurst, 2008, 98).

As we will see, *Riverdale* is a contemporary meditation on what Diane Long Hoeveler (1998, 19) locates at the crux of female Gothic fictions: 'the sense that middle-class women can only experience the male-identified patriarchal-capitalist home as either a prison or an asylum'. In exploring this theme, the series makes ample use of Gothic trappings, deploying haunted spaces, spectral visions, ghostly repetitions, supernatural phenomena, emotional intensities, and the looming specter of death to constructing a metaphor for patriarchal violence, and to explore possibilities for female resistance and the conveyance of traumatic memory.

Notably, *Riverdale* (like the comic tradition that inspired it) elides rigid conventions in other ways, as well: it is a postmodern assemblage of genres from murder mystery to teen drama, soap opera to musical, and combines strikingly disparate aesthetics ranging from restrained to melodramatic, serious to campy. It is also heavily allusive, referencing an array of other film and television narratives that likewise explore the tension between patriarchal ideologies and female desire, and the potentially traumatizing outcomes of this friction.

As I will explore, this generic and allusive hybridity play a vital role in *Riverdale*'s engagement with post-trauma, comingling with Gothic imagery and themes to reveal what Katharine Haake (2000) describes as the potential for art that is 'interstitial'—that is, hybrid, contradictory, indeterminate—to articulate that which eludes more conventional forms of representation:

> An interstice is a space between—not a shared space but a no-space, a space defined by none of its surrounding categories, but yet informed by them all . . . imagine the space that it opens out not as a continuum but as a plane, and a bit like the Derridean (1988a: 109) center—that very thing that is both itself and not ('the center is not the center') because it can be said to organize the structure while somehow lying outside the structure, and infinitely rich because of what is missing from it. (Haake, 2000, 94)

In other words, if the interstice is an entry point to an indeterminate plane, it might also be said to lend itself to the expression of trauma: a force that likewise shapes the symbolic while existing beyond the structures (linguistic, narrative, spatial, chronological) that constitute it. Indeed, *Riverdale* might be said to unfold entirely within a spatial interstice: an uncanny site that is 'both itself and not,' approximating the ideal structure of small-town America yet haunted by the specter of patriarchal violence, figured here as a force of literal and figurative death: a threat to identity and social order, and the impetus for their unraveling (Haake, 2000, 94).

In season one, this deadly intrusion is first brought to bear on Cheryl Blossom, twin sister to Jason. In the spirit of the teen drama, Cheryl is introduced as an archetypal ‘mean girl’ who enjoys economic affluence and social influence, but whose arrogance alienates her from many of her peers. She is also one of the campiest characters in *Riverdale*, prone to theatrical displays of emotion, issuing unparalleled insults, and parading her brazen fashion choices. Yet the early episodes of *Riverdale* plumb the depths of Cheryl’s clichéd exterior to reveal a more complex interior as it comes to light that she had shared with her twin brother a deep bond forged of the trauma of familial dysfunction. This revelation introduces into the series a familiar Gothic element, setting the stage for *Riverdale*’s emphasis on what Helen Wheatley (2006, 200), writing on American horror television, describes as 'permeable family homes under threat from within and without’. It also alludes to the reality that Jason’s death is neither the first nor the last form of violence that has worked to structure Cheryl’s identity, interpersonal relationships, and participation in the social body. It is, however, the catalyst for the return of the repressed, and for the dissolution of borders between the symbolically structured and the repressed of the real. For as Julia Kristeva (1982, 3), writing on abjection (a more violent iteration of the uncanny), observes, ‘the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything’.

In this arc, *Riverdale* introduces the paradox of traumatic representation by exteriorizing Cheryl’s traumatized psyche onto the televisual screen: an interface that enables the audience to affectively experience her symptoms as they rise to and occasionally eclipse the narrative surface. Consider the second episode of season one, which features a pep rally organized in Jason's memory. Standing on the stage with the rest of the cheerleading squad, Cheryl watches football players spill onto the field. Her face registers pained recognition as she fixates on the

new quarterback Archie Andrews and his face transforms into that of her deceased brother. The sound of the crowd recedes as the visual field is punctuated by flashbacks depicting her final moments with Jason: soft-focused, fleeting memories juxtaposed with the harsh stage lights of the present.

Three episodes later, the community assembles for Jason's memorial. Cheryl, seen earlier attired in black, enters in the white, red-belted dress she had worn in her final moments with her brother, inviting the gazes of other attendees. Her parents have forbidden her from speaking, yet she defiantly walks to the front of the room, accompanied by a haunting cover of the 1984 Tears for Fears hit 'Shout,' performed by female vocalist Malia J. Cheryl. She begins to issue a eulogy, but the scene is again interrupted by a sequence of ephemeral flashbacks of intimate moments shared with her brother. Her speech concludes abruptly as she quietly bursts into tears.

In the scenes described above, *Riverdale* establishes its concern with the paradox of traumatic representation, depicting trauma as a force that cannot fully enter narrative yet nevertheless produces a story: 'a wound that cries out' (Caruth, 2016, 4). Connoting Cheryl's profound longing for her brother, her compressed memories penetrate the present, disturbing the visual field to interrupt the forward-moving trajectory of the plot. An extension of the body, clothing likewise superimposes the past onto the present, evincing its enduring echoes. When spoken language fails to convey her pain and rage, music intercedes: repeating the phrase 'shout, shout, let it all out,' the haunting vocals reveal the potential for poetry to plumb the representational surface 'so that violence, surging up through phonetic, syntactic, and logical orders, could reach the symbolic order and the technocratic ideologies that had been built over this violence to ignore or repress it' (Kristeva, 1984, 83). In this way, *Riverdale* establishes how trauma might find articulation through the interplay of storyline and affect: that is, through

narrative and its remainders, which reside 'outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration, as it is from vital function' (Massumi, 2002, 25).

As season one continues, Cheryl's traumatic symptoms are employed not only to explore the trauma of this violent loss, but also to foreground *Riverdale*'s concern with how patriarchal violence manifests across the private and public spheres. This becomes especially clear in the penultimate episode, which foregrounds the series' enduring use of thanatological motifs to explore patriarchal violence and its consequences. This episode finally reveals the identity of Jason's killer: the twins' father Clifford Blossom, who had murdered his son after he refused to participate in the family drug trafficking operation. This revelation devastates Cheryl, whose distress intensifies upon the subsequent death of her filicidal father in an apparent suicide (which is later revealed to be the work of her mother Penelope).

Absent the patriarchal authority that structured it, the Blossom family becomes a site of traumatic eruption. This is first seen when Cheryl, again garbed in the white, red-belted dress that carries memories of her final moments with her brother, moves to drown herself in the lake where she had last encountered him. In this scene, Cheryl stands in the middle of the lake, which is covered in a thin layer of ice. In the spirit of Gothic fictions, the wintry landscape that surrounds her exteriorizes the cold, colorless quality of her existence, while the water beneath beckons her in its promise of liberation. On the shore her friends call out to her, begging her to return. The music swells, Cheryl falls through the ice, and the camera follows her beneath the water. Here, she (and the audience) experiences a haunting hallucination of Jason, whose reanimated corpse appears before her, a bullet hole through its rotting head. Jason reaches toward her, and she screams. Soon thereafter, Archie pulls her from the water. Cheryl narrowly survives her suicide attempt.

Writing on death, femininity, and aesthetics, Elisabeth Bronfen (1992, 142) describes female suicide as an act that 'implies an authorship with one's own life, a form of writing the self and writing death that is ambivalently poised between self-construction and self-destruction; a confirmation that is also an annihilation of the self, and as such another kind of attempt to know the self as radically different and other from the consciously known self during life'. Cheryl's brush with death is framed similarly: the archetypal act of suicide by drowning entails literal death but also a kind of figurative rebirth, with the fluid water representing an inviting escape from the rigid identity paradigms and constitutive traumas that have shaped her subjectivity to this juncture.

Yet interestingly, *Riverdale* soon takes yet another unanticipated turn. Contrary to expectation, the rescued Cheryl neither finds herself institutionalized (at least, not yet) nor languishes in her misery nor makes a successive attempt at her own life; rather, her self-destructive impulses rapidly cede to an alternative mode of destructive desire, this time oriented toward her familial home. In this scene, her mother Penelope observes that a strange smell has permeated the mansion. Cheryl turns toward her, dressed in an iteration of the white and red ensemble she wore to the memorial service and wielding a lit candelabra. 'Gasoline,' she replies. 'It's the only way we can start over and be purified' ('The Sweet Hereafter'). She dramatically flings the candelabra, and the women escape the mansion then look on as it burns to the ground. In the opening episode of season two, the viewer learns that Penelope had suffered severe burns after re-entering the home to rescue a family portrait, the last vestige of a fallen patriarchal empire, from the flames.

For the first but not the last time, here *Riverdale* conjures the memory of Brian De Palma's 1976 film *Carrie*, based on Stephen King's horrific 1974 coming-of-age novel of the

same name. This macabre allusion cements what will become a driving theme in *Riverdale*, denoting its concern with the traumatizing outcomes of heteropatriarchal demands. As Tony Williams (2015, 196), writing on commonalities across the work of Freud and the familial horror film, observes: 'His findings result from traumatic events within a specific social institution—the bourgeois family attempting to mold its subjects into acceptable gender positions'. The choice of *Carrie* as a point of reference is especially interesting: scholars have long debated whether the film reinforces masculine fantasies 'in which the feminine is constituted as horrific' or, contrastingly, if its titular character might be read as enacting 'positive rebellion' against repressive societal forces (Lindsey, 1991, 34). *Riverdale* similarly maps the figurative death of archetypal femininity, patterned according to male desire and reinforced by the figure of the overbearing mother. Yet by explicitly contextualizing female monstrosity as a product of patriarchal violence and its traumatic imprints, the series elides the tendency in horror to frame female adolescence itself as a source of terror; instead, it situates patriarchal ideology as the 'true' monster, and as catalyst for the violent eruption of feminine emotionality. The monstrous-feminine in *Riverdale* thus emerges as an embodiment of repressed trauma, and a force hell-bent on eradicating the patriarchal institution of the family—and thus the structure in which Cheryl's (and Carrie's) identity is embedded. Here we see a prime example of how generic play can be employed to express a 'force of desire' that 'emerges in a *separate* site, made contradictorily coherent by virtue of its dependence on and resistance to genre as proscription' (Haake, 2000, 94).

On the topic of play, I would be remiss not to mention that despite the darkness of this scene, Cheryl's performance is tinged with campy, soap operatic excess. Surprisingly, however, rather than detract from the narrative, this quality serves to heighten its affective power. Writing

on daytime television, Jane Feuer (1984, 8) traces a genealogy of theorizations of the melodrama, noting that they exhibit a shared understanding of the genre as one that produces an *excess,* 'whether that excess be defined as a split between the level of narrative and that of *mise en scène* or as a form of "hysteria," the visually articulated return of the ideologically repressed. Despite the changing theoretical stances, all see the excess not merely as aesthetic but as *ideological*, opening up a textual space which may be read against the seemingly hegemonic surface'. Susan Sontag (1996, 238) similarly draws attention to the excessive qualities of camp, aptly describing it as 'art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is "too much"'. Continuing, she contends that in its excesses, camp performance might elicit affection for a character: 'Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of "character" . . . Camp is a *tender* feeling' (Sontag, 1996, 244).

Cheryl's exaggerated performance produces a kind of dissonance in relation to the somber—indeed, suicidal—themes that emerge earlier in this episode. Yet rather than impede audience identification, this contradiction in feeling and form solicits recognition, registering the complexity of her emotional state at the level of affect, where trauma finds its most potent expression: as Sontag (1996, 240) phrases it, the camp sensibility embodies 'a theatricalization of experience'. Consider also the conclusion of the episode, which features a montage of images set to a swelling musical theme: the mansion burning; a closeup of Cheryl's countenance, framed by her flaming red hair; her mother in the background, striking out at her in slow motion. As in the soap opera, this melodramatic ending 'leaves a residue of emotional intensity . . . It serves as a form of punctuation, signifying momentary closure, but it also carries meaning within the scene, a meaning connected to the intense interpersonal involvements each scene depicts' (Feuer,

1984, 11). Finally, it is perhaps owing to her 'too muchness' that Cheryl's fate diverges so dramatically from that of Carrie: while Carrie is destroyed by her own pyromaniacal rage, Cheryl survives the burning of her familial home, departing from conventional horror in which the monstrous-feminine is killed, or at least provisionally subdued. In this way, *Riverdale* raises the possibility that from the ashes, at the intersection of generic convention and negation, she might forge an identity removed from the familial expectations that have circumscribed her existence.

Season one of *Riverdale* thus foregrounds its concern with patriarchal violence, as well as with the potential for female desire to countervail its deadly trajectory. Moreover, it solicits audience identification with traumatic memory across multiple planes. In its enduring emphasis on the family as a haunted sphere, *Riverdale* facilitates what Wheatley (2006, 200) describes as a dialogue between 'the textual domestic spaces of Gothic television' and 'the extra-textual domestic spaces of the medium (the homes in which Gothic television is viewed),' whereby 'structures of identification are laid in place which potentially render the Gothic on television as one of the most affective of genres'. In the process, it also 'teaches its reader how to read,' demonstrating how the interplay of generic conventions and aesthetic impulses, narrative and its excesses, might produce novel paradigms of meaning and audience identification (Haake, 2000, 96). Finally, as season one approaches its conclusion, *Riverdale* commits to an overarching narrative of violent repetition, instigated by the near-fatal shooting of Fred Andrews, father to Archie, by a serial killer. In the wake of the incident, the traumatic landscape of *Riverdale* enlarges to further explore the myriad shapes that patriarchal violence might take, as well as the various ways that bodies are inscribed and reinscribed in relation to the deadly orientation of male desire.

Bodies in Excess: Navigating Death and Desire

Season two of *Riverdale* raises the possibility of endless violent repetition as its teens attempt to solve the mystery of the serial killer now in their midst. In doing so, it employs an enduring sense of thanatological dread to further elaborate a metaphor for the violent orientation of patriarchal ideologies both within the private sphere of the home and across domains of public life. The central character in this arc is Betty Cooper: the Nancy Drew-like protagonist of the series and the party responsible for exposing Clifford's filicide in season one. In season two, Betty is confronted by a more familiar paternal monster: the serial killer, known as the Black Hood, is eventually revealed to be her own father, Hal Cooper.

Initially, the as-yet unidentified killer embarks upon a murderous spree whose victims have no apparent connection to one another. Already fragmented by the events of season one, the residents of Riverdale are gripped by a collective sense of dread, as though frozen in a moment between violence past and future. Little comfort is to be found when a motive comes to light: 'It's a town of hypocrites, degenerates, and criminals,' writes the Black Hood in an open letter to Riverdale. 'My wrath is the price of your lies, your secrets, your sins' ('The Town That Dreaded Sundown'). In the interest of restoring moral order to the town, the killer is targeting victims engaged in 'immoral' pursuits ranging from premarital sex to adultery to drug dealing. He also takes a special interest in Betty, regularly contacting her to convince her that, like him, she harbors a darkness within.

As Betty's investigation into this new reign of terror proceeds, a darkness does emerge in the shape of an alter-ego that viewers have dubbed 'Dark Betty': a hyper-sexualized, sometimes violent iteration of Betty whose interior impulses are exteriorized in her dark, revealing clothing and black wig. This again reflects *Riverdale*'s impulse to adopt familiar generic tropes, emulating

any number of teen dramas in which the girl next door experiments with rebellion, exchanging her preppy cardigan for black leather, modesty for overt sexuality. In a darker vein, it also calls to mind a trope that pervades the masculinist worlds of conventional detective and crime fiction: the so-called ‘black widow,’ an embodiment of deadly seduction.

Amid these plays on the patriarchal imagination of femininity, however, there materializes a counter-narrative that at once underscores the traumatizing outcomes of and defies patriarchal demands. *Riverdale* stages this subversion as Betty uncovers several family secrets that speak to the quotidian violence to which women are routinely subjected. She learns that decades earlier, her father had attempted to force her mother Alice to terminate her first pregnancy, driving her to give birth clandestinely and place the child for adoption. More recently, Hal had had Betty’s teenaged sister Polly, who had been impregnated by the now-deceased Jason, institutionalized in what is later revealed to be a violently conservative religious home for troubled youth.

Here *Riverdale* again reveals its indebtedness to Gothic fiction, and particularly the female Gothic concern with gender tensions in the domestic sphere. The revelations described above serve to situate the female body (and especially the female reproductive body) as a scene of conflict: a site where individual will, agency, and desire contend with the repressive impulses of patriarchal authority. It is within this context that Betty's dark transformation takes on significance. While the ‘darkness’ of her father is oriented toward the restoration of conservative institutions, that of Betty manifests in defiance of the same. One of the clearest examples of this emerges in a plotline that plays on the rape revenge narrative, as well as recalling the real-world memory of the sexual assaults two Steubenville High School football players inflicted upon their teenage victim in 2012 (Oppel, 2013).

The arc in question introduces Chuck, a Riverdale High football star with a penchant for sexually harassing his female peers—including Betty's sister Polly and, more recently, her best friend Veronica—in-person and online. In response, the female teens of *Riverdale* mobilize to expose, intervene in, and invert the sexist power dynamics at play. For her part, 'Dark Betty' takes things a step further: she seduces Chuck, inviting him to join her in a hot tub. There she drugs and handcuffs him, interrogates him until he confesses, and nearly drowns him as Veronica watches in horror, begging her to put an end to the scene. For a moment, she also momentarily imagines that she is not Betty, but her sister Polly. Later in the season, Betty also employs her alter-ego to explore her sexuality both online and onstage, and against the warnings of her mother, whose reproaches echo the moralizing pronouncements issued by her (as-yet-unexposed) serial killer husband.

It seems pertinent to note that while she is a figure born of trauma, 'Dark Betty,' like Cheryl, is characterized by melodramatic impulses. Yet rather than detract from her storyline, this excess amplifies the conflict at its core, recalling what Hoeveler (1998, 216), writing on Bertha of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, describes as a 'Gothic antiheroine': a figure marked by her 'excessive, hyperbolic, carnivalesque body' in contrast to the 'composed, privatized, repressed body' of the Gothic heroine. Of course, in *Riverdale* 'Dark Betty' is situated as a foil for Betty herself, as well as for her mother and sister: women whose bodies are subjected to repression within the context of the 'male-identified patriarchal-capitalist home' (Hoeveler, 1998, 19). Perhaps most importantly, in her melodramatic excess she also acts as a counterforce to the heavy-handed moralizing and murderous violence of the Black Hood: like Brontë's Bertha, 'Dark Betty' instills 'fear of impotence before the sexually voracious antiheroine' (Hoeveler, 1998, 217). 'Dark Betty' thus emerges not merely as an example of how trauma

inscribes female bodies and subjectivities, but also as a vehicle for resisting the violent forces of male desire.

Again, here self-awareness and self-negation coalesce in *Riverdale* to produce a separate site, one where the body might enact what Elizabeth Grosz (1990) terms 'counterstrategic reinscription':

> If the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organization. As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus also a site of *resistance*, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counterstrategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways (Grosz, 1990, 64).

This arc is paralleled by two others that explore female sexuality as simultaneous object of and force of resistance against patriarchal repression. The first follows Veronica Lodge, a Latinx woman, Betty's best friend, and daughter to Hiram Lodge, one of the central antagonists of *Riverdale*. The wealthy, well-connected Hiram is hell-bent on the transformation of Riverdale into his personal empire through the acquisition of land in the working-class community and criminalization of its residents—both in the interest of filling vacancies in his under-construction private prison, which will double as a drug manufacturing plant. An archetypal 'daddy's girl,' Veronica bears witness as her father leverages the chaos induced by the at-large serial killer to achieve his designs, which threaten both to corrupt the grander socio-political order and to dissolve the intimate familial bonds in which her own identity is embedded.

In this arc, the female body is persistently staged as a site of sexual transgression against patriarchal demands. For the duration of *Riverdale*, Veronica and Archie are involved in a relationship whose sexual dimension entails the comingling of violence and eroticism—a motif that emerges during their first sexual encounter. Here, Archie returns from the hospital where his father, having been shot by the Black Hood moments earlier, remains at the edge of life and death.

Archie is drenched in blood, a shocking, corporeal reminder of the trauma inscribed in his psyche. Veronica arrives on the scene. Archie enters the shower, where the camera lingers on the crimson-stained water washing away from his body and swirling down the drain. She strips naked and joins him. They kiss passionately, his blood-stained hands embracing her face.

It should be noted at this juncture that *Riverdale* has garnered criticism for its sexualization of young women: as Gianluca Russo (2017) of *Teen Vogue* rightly observes, 'in a twist of irony, the Black Hood might even consider the writers and show itself "guilty" of lust in their own way, too'. This is a fair assessment, and one that is most powerfully reflected in yet another example of the series' generic hybridity: the darker plotlines of *Riverdale* are routinely punctuated by musical numbers featuring scantily clad members of its female teens performing overtly sexual lyrics and/or dance routines centered on decidedly 'adult' themes (including the aptly titled numbers 'Daddy Lessons' and 'Sugar Daddy').

Yet this is precisely the point. In a series concerned with the regulation of female bodies and behaviors, these performances—often staged to resemble professional music videos—at once underscore the objectifying impulses of entertainment media and (not unlike the musical numbers of Bollywood cinema) operate as fantastical spaces in which young women achieve provisional liberation from the patriarchal impulse to constrain their bodies and desires. This is not lost on actresses Lili Reinhart (Betty), Camila Mendes (Veronica), and Madelaine Petsch (Cheryl). As Nicholas Miller (2018, 208) observes, 'the actors in *Riverdale* do not merely inhabit the characters from Archie comics on the television screen; they also inform how those characters get read through interviews and social media, particularly on platforms like Instagram and Twitter'. Continuing, he describes how Petsch and other female cast members use social media to call attention to the sexism of the original *Archie* comics and, with reference to

Riverdale, 'craft a feminist narrative around herself and the Archie-verse more broadly' (Miller, 2018, 209). Paola Brembilla and Chiara Checcaglini (2020, 46) provide a similar assessment of the transmedial world of *Riverdale,* likewise highlighting how its actresses employ social media to reframe original depictions of their characters as 'more feminist and sex positive heroines than their actual depiction in *Archie*'s conservative storyline,' and to 'endorse the empowering and postfeminist aspirations of *Riverdale,* through pictures underlining sisterhood as well as the intimate, authentic relationship among cast members'.

As the season continues, Veronica's sexual prowess becomes an oppositional force to the moralizing impulses of the serial killer, as well as a means of forging intimate linkages between bodies in pain. As Jughead explains in a voiceover describing the terror induced by the Black Hood: 'How did we cope? In the case of Archie and Veronica, it was through carnal defiance' ('House of the Devil'). At the same time, Archie begins to manifest a range of post-traumatic symptoms, from guilt to insomnia, paranoia to rage, as well as intrusive flashbacks that return him (and the audience) to the bloodied scene of his father's shooting. These slippages persistently interrupt the linear trajectory of the plot, threatening to engulf his present and future. Veronica's desire acts as an affirmative and equally affective antithesis to these debilitating symptoms and death-oriented visions: a force that re-routes repressed trauma into a shared experience of corporeal pleasure.

Veronica is also employed to examine more quotidian forms of patriarchal violence. The most representative arc in this vein aired early in season two, amid the late-2017 revival of the #MeToo movement, which encourages victims of sexual violence to share their stories in recognition of the tendency of patriarchal culture to protect powerful perpetrators while silencing their victims. Earlier in season one, amid the Chuck debacle, Veronica plays a vital role in

organizing against rape culture at her high school: as Amber Moore (2020, 7) observes, her 'feminist snaps' demonstrate 'a range in her abilities to interrogate sexism and effect change,' as well as adding a much-needed (if imperfectly executed) intersectional feminist perspective to the narrative.

Season two centers Veronica more firmly amid an interrogation of rape culture. The arc in question revolves around a character named Nick, a childhood friend of Veronica's whose parents are potential investors in Hiram's business enterprise. Hiram instructs Veronica to entertain Nick during his visit; one night, Nick attempts to coerce her into sex under the influence of drugs. The following day, Nick commits a more egregious act when he drugs Cheryl and attempts to rape her. The subsequent episode features a scene that attests to the tendency of patriarchal culture to repress and rewrite traumatic memory: 'You roofied me,' Cheryl tells Nick. 'You tried to rape me.' 'I don't think that's what happened,' he replies. 'Let's not distort reality to cover your morning-after shame. You were high, half-naked, begging for it' ('Death Proof'). Underscoring how socio-economic relations work to affirm dominant power structures, Nick then explains that Cheryl's mother has accepted a bribe from his parents in exchange for her silence.

It is through the efforts of Veronica and three other women of color—the Black members of the local band Josie and the Pussycats—that Cheryl narrowly escapes sexual assault. As Nick moves to rape Cheryl, the four women arrive on the scene, pull him from her nearly unconscious body, and viciously beat him. I would be remiss not to mention that in this scene, as in many others, *Riverdale* depicts Black women as agents of change while failing to adequately flesh out their own stories: as Moore (2020, 9-10) observes, 'while their snaps are dynamic, they remain at the margins of the largely white-centered storylines,' a notion that applies even as they 'literally interrupt sexual violence'. On the other hand, Veronica grows ever bolder and multidimensional in the face

of patriarchal violence. In another melodramatic turn, following his attempted rape of Cheryl, Nick effectively transforms into a soap opera villain: he kidnaps Archie and places him in front of a live-streaming video of the hotel room where he is scheduled to meet Veronica, who he intends to seduce (and perhaps murder) as Archie watches. Archie grows violently angry, escapes captivity, and begins to make his way to the hotel room—in the spirit of the daytime drama, the series anticipates a brutal clash between the devoted lover and the sleazy playboy. This is a highly effective setup for what unfolds next: with virtually zero effort, Veronica uses her powers of seduction to disarm Nick; by the time Archie arrives on the scene, he is unconscious on the floor. Veronica has roofied him, turning the tables against a serial sexual offender, defying the expectation that she requires rescuing, and bringing an end to her father's lucrative relationship with Nick's parents.

Riverdale also elaborates Veronica's place within the patriarchal family structure as a mirror for the place of vulnerable bodies within the grander social, economic, and political conflicts her father engenders. By season two, Hiram (who likewise exhibits soap opera villain qualities) is deeply engaged in the dispossession and displacement of the community's poor and working-class community members. In this plotline, *Riverdale* elaborates a localized portrait of necrocapitalism: a concept coined by Marina Gržinić (2014) to describe how deregulation and privatization work to subjugate marginalized populations. While this term typically refers to the dehumanizing outcomes of global capitalism and its colonial epistemologies, it has also been applied to gentrification, a process that rests at the heart of Hiram's schemes. As Elijah Adiv Edelman (2014, 177) writes: 'Gentrification, as a kind of necrocapitalist reformation of space, renders bodies that stand in the way of capitalist productivity as pathological and malignant tumors in an otherwise healthy expansion of capitally productive landscapes'.

It also comes to light that after shutting down the working-class community high school, Hiram intends to build in its place a private prison—a gesture toward how the carceral apparatus upholds the necrocapitalist practice of determining 'which bodies matter, which have the status of undiscussed brand(s) and which are sorted in relationship to systematic *identitarian* classifications that are, in the end, reproducing a system of racial and class division' (Gržinić and Tatlić, 2014, 299-300). The series also alludes to the historical dimensions of such violence when Hiram controversially sponsors a celebration of Riverdale's founder, setting into motion an arc that reveals the settler-colonial origins of the town. Notably, the consequences of Hiram's endeavors are frequently brought to bear on *Riverdale*'s male characters, whose brutalized bodies manifest the wounds of poverty, protest, gang warfare, drug violence, and incarceration.

The Lodge patriarch is thus depicted as an administrator of social, cultural, and literal death. As in the case of Betty and her father, the relationship between Veronica and Hiram serves as a private corollary to these public examples of the contested place of vulnerable bodies within schemas of male desire. This is seen in an arc that centers on Veronica's confirmation ceremony—a plotline introduced as she is being fitted for a white dress, a familiar signifier of adherence to the patriarchal paradigms of female spiritual devotion and sexual purity, and of the Latinx Catholic traditions to which the family in which her identity is embedded has long subscribed. At the confirmation, Veronica is asked to renounce Satan; she hesitates as she glances toward her parents, a subtle acknowledgment of her father's transgressions (and her mother's complicity), and of the performative nature of the ceremony at whose center she now stands. As Veronica increasingly comes to terms with the dark side of the father she idolizes, her sexuality emerges as an avenue of defiance not only against the anonymous serial killer, but also against her own paternal monster: 'If our young lovers dared to defy the Black Hood,' asks Jughead, narrating a scene in which

Veronica and Archie have sex in the living room of her parents' luxurious apartment, 'why not risk Hiram Lodge's wrath, as well?' ('House of the Devil').

This returns us to Cheryl, whose season two arc reaffirms the place of the body as a site continually inscribed and reinscribed in accordance with normative gender and sexual paradigms. By this juncture, Cheryl, a lesbian, has begun dating Toni: a bisexual woman of Indigenous ancestry and resident of the community that Hiram seeks to gentrify. Cheryl's sexuality and her strengthening relationship with the working-class community present clear dangers to what remains of her familial empire. Her mother Penelope commits her to a religious home for troubled youth—the same home in which she herself, and later Betty's pregnant sister, had once resided. There, Cheryl is subjected to conversion therapy.

Importantly, after this episode aired the Twittersphere witnessed a complex assortment of reactions, with some viewers noting the traumatizing effects of viewing on-screen recreations of violence against queer individuals. There is a genre problem at play, as well: a historical glance both at true crime reportage and crime fiction in the United States (and elsewhere) reveals a long history of pathologizing non-heteronormative desire—a product of both religious discourses on homosexuality as moral aberration and more recent sexological discourses on same-sex love as a kind of congenital abnormality: 'Their deviant or backward behavior was thought to have a physiological basis' (Faderman, 1992, 40). On the other hand, here *Riverdale* boldly takes on a form of historical violence that persists even into the present day: as the National Center for Lesbian Rights notes, some mental health providers continue to subject gay and lesbian clients to 'reparative therapy,' 'ex-gay therapy,' and 'sexual orientation change efforts' in defiance of majority consensus on the ethics (and efficacy) of conversion therapy ('Born Perfect').

I contend that *Riverdale* makes highly effective use of Gothic trappings to articulate the unspeakable violence of conversion therapy. In doing so, it affirms what Laura Westengard (drawing on the work of psychologist Maria Root) describes as the aptness of the Gothic for metaphorizing the insidious forms of trauma experienced by queer individuals:

> The Gothic is queer, trauma is Gothic, and queer cultural production is both queer and Gothic because it responds to trauma, specifically insidious trauma or 'the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit'. (Westengard, 2019, 30)

During Cheryl's institutionalization, the youth home transforms into something akin to an archetypal madhouse, replete with sinister doctors and black-garbed nuns who emerge from the shadows, seeking to purge her of 'unnatural thoughts' ('Primary Colors'). Her body is highly regulated through manual labor, routine sedation, and a dress code that includes infantilizing pigtails, as though to strip her of her sexual desire and desirability through a return to childhood innocence: a reflection of how heteropatriarchal disciplinary regimes work to denote the body as 'capable of acting in distinctive ways, performing specific tasks in socially specified ways, marked, branded, by a social seal' (Grosz, 1994, 118). Most disturbingly, Cheryl manifests a range of haunting symptoms, her body becoming a vessel for traumatic expression as she recoils in terror, weeps uncontrollably, and experiences an inability to distinguish between delusion and reality. Frequently, the audience is invited to participate in these experiences through high angle shots that emphasize her vulnerability, as well as uncanny audiovisual effects that mimic her hallucinations. In this way, the arc reveals how the 'crannies and crevices of the Gothic' enable us to examine not only the more shocking forms of violence to which queer individuals are subject, but also 'the accumulated daily assaults arising from systemic refusals and validations' (Westengard, 2019, 2-3).

While Cheryl is thus symptomized, *Riverdale* does not uncritically reproduce pathologizing approaches to homosexuality, but rather reveals what queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 47) describes as the possibility for 'understanding traumatic feelings not as a medical problem in search of a cure but as felt experiences that can be mobilized in a range of directions'. Moreover, this mobilization of felt experience persists after Cheryl is rescued from this house of horrors and returns to her home. This moment marks yet another shift from Gothic horror to Gothic camp as she appears before her mother garbed in a blood-drenched white gown. She threatens to again burn down their home if she is not granted emancipation, and her mother agrees to her demand. There is no room for doubt concerning the deliberateness of the scene's excess: it transpires against the backdrop of a Riverdale High stage performance of *Carrie*.

While this brief but powerful scene is a deeply personal one, in reanimating Cheryl's associations with Carrie it underscores again how trauma resonates across discrete bodies and texts, as well as the uncanny shapes it might assume as it approaches representation. In a related vein, the campiness of this scene might also be read as an acknowledgment of the history of queer communities embracing camp as a covert means of self- and other-identification owing to 'the secrecy of its message, the use of innuendo, the need for plausible deniability' (Schneider, 2020, 4). Of course, by this juncture Cheryl's sexual orientation is no longer a secret; nevertheless, here camp serves the purpose it has long served in queer communities, in that it 'neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness' (Sontag, 1996, 243). In turn, it again signals Cheryl's refusal to adhere to heteropatriarchal paradigms of female identity, registers the intensity of her complex emotional state, and produces in the audience enjoyment, a '*tender* feeling' (Sontag, 1996, 244). In this way, the scene also illustrates the potential for trauma narratives to elicit not only negative feelings, but also audience pleasure: as Cvetkovich (2003,

242) observes, ‘emotional experience and the memory of it demand and produce an unusual archive, one that frequently resists the coherence of narrative’.

Riverdale’s young women thus not only bear the wounds of patriarchal violence, but also plumb the subconscious depths of the town to expose and resist the far-reaching, interconnected, and traumatizing consequences of patriarchal ideology as the cumulative sins of their fathers extend the private trauma they have endured into the death-haunted public sphere. As season two approaches its conclusion, it appears also to approach a reinstatement of the status quo: Hal is identified and imprisoned, bringing an end to the Black Hood’s murderous reign. Yet Riverdale remains haunted not only by the past crimes of its fathers, but also by the specter of traumatic repetition as other monstrous patriarchs rise to the fore of the plot.

Uncanny Symptoms, Monstrous Visions

In season three, the violence that drives *Riverdale* achieves new heights with the continuation of old plotlines and the introduction of a complicated array of new ones. By this juncture Hiram has accumulated properties across town, consolidated control over local business, law enforcement, politics, and media, and made significant progress toward constructing his private prison and establishing a lucrative drug trade. The season also introduces two new villains: Edgar, the charismatic leader of a cult in which several residents of the town seek healing after season two (and which, in another bizarre plot twist, is harvesting and selling the organs of its members); and Cheryl’s uncle Claudius Blossom, who arrives to take over the family drug trade (under the direction of Hiram) after the death of his identical twin Clifford.

This season also introduces yet another serial murderer: the ‘Gargoyle King,’ a costumed man donning a bloodied snout, tall horns, and branches that protrude like wings from its black-

garbed body. This angel of death materializes as Riverdale's youth grow enchanted with a fantasy role-playing game titled *Gryphons and Gargoyles*—a play on the real-life RPG *Dungeons and Dragons* and the Satanic panic it fueled in the 1980s Unites States. As *G&G* gains popularity, the monster accumulates an ever-expanding throng of disciples, some of whom become embroiled in his murderous plots, and others of whom he drives to suicide. While Hiram, Edgar, and Claudius emerge as viable suspects behind the Gargoyle King, the monster is eventually revealed to be the brainchild of Penelope Blossom, who is aided by the imprisoned (and later escaped) Hal: the monstrous father, we learn, had desired to ensure the continuance of his reign of moralizing terror even after his capture; the monstrous mother had desired revenge against a society that had allowed the Blossom family to adopt her as a child and groom her to become Clifford's bride.

The Gargoyle King emerges as *Riverdale*'s most potent metaphor for the violent orientation of patriarchal desire. This begins to take shape in a flashback episode in which the youth of *Riverdale* are re-cast as teenaged versions of their parents. This arc takes place twenty-five years in the past. The teens gather one night to play *G&G* at Riverdale High, a site of everyday life that, like other locations in the series, takes on a Gothic quality as the plot unfolds: as Betty's mother Alice explains, through the game, 'our dark doppelgangers were released' ('The Midnight Club'). Underscoring its role as a manifestation of patriarchal desire, in the flashback the monster presents itself to a single character: Alice, who has just learned that she is pregnant by Hal. This nightmarish encounter anticipates the multiple traumas she will endure as Hal first attempts to convince her to terminate her pregnancy, then drives her to give birth covertly and place the child for adoption in a literal iteration of the most archaic trauma: the

phallic insistence that one ‘release the hold of *maternal* entity even before existing outside of her’ (Kristeva, 1982, 13).

In the present of season three, it is Betty who most powerfully manifests the trauma of patriarchal violence. Notably, early in the season she is driven to reunite with her estranged father in a kind of return to the traumatic scene—in doing so, she hopes, she might gain insight into the identity of the Gargoyle King. This arc recalls *The Silence of the Lambs* in its depiction of the young female investigator collaborating with the imprisoned psychoanalyst-cum-father figure to prevent a violent repetition. Yet in another departure from generic convention, resolution is deferred as Betty begins to experience an assortment of strange symptoms. The first is a disturbing hallucination in which her mother and sister, surrounded by members of the local cult, hold her infant niece and nephew over a fire, as though in an act of sacrifice. Later, Betty experiences seizures and fainting spells, which eventually affect other young women, as well. As in earlier arcs, these highly affective scenes persistently interrupt the forward-moving trajectory of the plot to foreground the enduringness of trauma, both personal and familial: ‘an emotional qualification breaks diegetic continuity for a moment to register a state—actually to re-register an already felt state, for the skin is faster than the word' (Massumi, 2002, 25).

These developments culminate on prom night as Betty confronts the nightmarish Gargoyle King in Riverdale High, recalling her mother’s encounter decades prior in a testament to trauma’s intergenerational effects. Betty is armed and prepared to put an end to its reign of terror. Yet resolution is again deferred when her father, now escaped from prison, arrives on the scene in the guise of the Black Hood, again laying bare trauma’s compulsion to repeat. In the surreal moments that follow, Hal chases her through the school, now littered with the corpses of

her peers. Betty narrowly escapes his murderous rampage, though it clear that she cannot escape her nightmarish familial past.

The following episode further elaborates both the enduringness and the shareability of trauma through both intratextual and intertextual allusion. Betty and Alice prepare to sell their home and begin life anew. After her mother leaves to acquire packing boxes, Betty enters the living room holding a lit candle and moving deliberately, as though in a trance. The camera pans slowly across the space, anticipating its inevitable destruction. It cuts to a new scene before returning us to the house: Alice enters the smoke-filled room, whose curtains are aflame.

This scene is one of traumatic rupture: a violent discharge of sensation that carries both deeply personal trauma and a deeply personal desire for liberation. Yet it carries also the affective weight of traumas and desires that arise across and beyond the landscape of *Riverdale*. A repetition of the arson committed by Cheryl (whose own arson is a repetition of that committed by Carrie), this scene attests to the young women's shared experiences of imprisonment in the Gothic site of the 'male-identified patriarchal-capitalist home' (Hoeveler, 1998, 19). It attests also to their shared impulse to carve out new territories of existence distinct from the traumas they have endured. Titled 'Fire Walk with Me,' the episode also explicitly alludes to yet another external trauma plot: David Lynch's 1992 *Twin Peaks* prequel, which follows the tragic destruction of small-town teenager Laura Palmer as she is repeatedly raped and eventually murdered by her father, who is possessed by an entity that seems to embody 'the evil that men do' ('Arbitrary Law'). The connection between these texts is reinforced by the on-screen presence of actress Mädchen Amick, who portrays Alice in *Riverdale* and domestic violence victim and working-class single mother Shelly Johnson in *Twin Peaks* and its 2017 revival. Like domestic spaces across the *Twin Peaks* universe, the Cooper home represents a

formerly secure site of everyday life transformed into an uncanny scene, haunted by patriarchal violence and feminine emotional excess. In this way, *Riverdale* again connects 'quality of excess to quality of excess' to further illuminate how trauma (and particularly female trauma) resonates across temporal, spatial, and textual domains, and to articulate the desire for destructive renewal (Massumi, 2002, 249).

As season three approaches its conclusion, *Riverdale* grows ever more surreal in its explorations of patriarchal violence and post-trauma. By this juncture Betty is deeply invested in her investigation of the local cult, 'The Farm,' whose leader Edgar has leveraged the widespread mania induced by *G&G* to grow his throng of adherents. During her investigation, Betty learns that in addition to her mother and sister, several of her peers have fallen victim to Edgar's promises, which include a professed ability to enable the living to commune with the dead. Unable to cope with her loss of Jason, Cheryl joins the cult, where she is indeed reunited with her deceased brother, at least by her own account: she can see her brother, talk with him, hold him, she explains to her friends, from who she grows ever more estranged as she grows wholly devoted to communing with his ghost. Other recent converts include the gay character Kevin and the bisexual Fangs: two young men who throughout *Riverdale* struggle with the repression of their same-sex desire. This bizarre arc plays on our collective fascination with controversial cults and their often violently patriarchal leaders (as demonstrated by the popularity of recent documentaries such as *Children of God* (1994), *Holy Hell* (2016), and *Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult* (2020), among others), emphasizing their tendency to prey on the vulnerable. To ensure her family's safety, Betty eventually resolves to join, as well. Thereafter, Edgar subjects her to hypnosis, whereupon she encounters her uncanny doppelganger: a figure who arouses potent anxieties, recalling Freud's (2003, 142-144) appraisal of the double as symptomatic of an

ego disturbance: ‘the helplessness we experience in certain dream-states,’ ‘the factor of unintended repetition,’ ‘the harbinger of death’.

While these symptoms allude to the impossibility of traumatic resolution, they also further extend *Riverdale*’s meditation on the shapes that patriarchal violence might take. The exact cause of Betty’s hallucinations is never revealed, but it is implied that they derive from her anxiety and insomnia, induced by being gaslit by the adults in her life each time she approaches the truth about the violence that threatens to irrevocably destroy her community. We learn that the fainting spells she and her female peers experience are induced by drug manufacturing waste that Hiram and Claudius have allowed to leak into (or deliberately leaked into) the local water supply—a revelation that attends to the slow violence of public health injustice and environmental destruction as byproducts of capitalist desire. Her encounter with her double (and other characters’ encounters with their dead loved ones) is finally exposed as a perverse hypnotherapeutic ruse orchestrated to ensnare her in the cult, another paradigm of patriarchal control where the vulnerable are subjected to psychological and physical violence in name of profit.

To Be Continued?

The conclusion of season three supplies provisional respite from the violence that haunts *Riverdale*: Hiram is imprisoned; Edgar’s dark designs are exposed; and the Gargoyle King is unmasked. Moreover, Penelope confesses that she had coordinated the materialization of this most recent monster, seeking revenge against a society that had failed to intervene when, as a child, she was adopted and groomed to marry her brother to secure her family’s affluence for yet

another generation. She also abruptly murders Hal, marking the true end of his murderous reign. The series' teens narrowly survive a life-and-death game of *G&G*.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of many postmodern fictions, *Riverdale* resists our desire for closure, it's long-haunted daughters and mothers reminding us of the traumatic outcomes of patriarchal demands and the possibility that violence imposed from without might also engender violence within. As the season comes to an end, we are also left with the certainty that further eruptions of violence are on the horizon, and with the paralyzing possibility of a foreclosed future. Such irresolution offers insight into the allure of *Riverdale*, which between its first and second seasons witnessed a 140 percent increase in female same-day viewers under 35 and a nearly 500 percent increase in teenaged same-day viewers—despite downward trends in teenage television viewership overall (Adalian, 2017). It can also help to account for our collective fascination with other genre-bending series that assault us with violent visions and thanatological themes.

This is not to suggest that trauma is a novel televisual topic. As Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005, 115) explain, American television in the 1980s was saturated with examples of 'trauma drama,' a genre in which ordinary citizens contend with institutional idleness, corruption, and violence, and which reflects 'a heightened realism underscored by the narratives of personal battle and triumph over institutional failure or irresponsibility'. Yet while *Riverdale* similarly explores these themes, it also reflects the demand in contemporary society—a society in which social, economic, and political injustice have risen to the fore of public discourse—for media that acknowledges the impossibility of fully overturning entrenched power paradigms, as well as the difficulty of relating our emotional and embodied experiences of them in coherent terms.

Exchanging the 'self-help individualism' of Reagan-era television (Biressi and Nunn, 2005, 115) for an exploration of the interconnectedness of bodies within networks of violence, *Riverdale* elicits audience identification with its characters' (and other television and film characters') unique yet linked experiences of violence and post-trauma in patriarchal society. And by exchanging resolute realism for irresolute surrealism, it both acknowledges the 'unrepresentable' of trauma and illustrates how it might be articulated in novel ways. Finally, in refusing accounts of trauma as eternally foreclosed, *Riverdale* renders the spectator a participant in eluding the phallic logic of death that drives both its internal narrative and real-world narratives of violence. To extent that this small town remains a haunted 'no-place,' it thus functions also as what Bracha Ettinger (2006, 159), writing on aesthetic possibilities for traumatic witnessing, describes as a 'homeplace' of encounter: a 'fragile extimate zone of potential sharing with-in the trauma of the other'.

Bibliography

Adalian, Josef, '*Riverdale*'s Premier Ratings are Stunning—and Netflix May Be the Reason Why,' *Vulture*, 12th October 2017, available from: https://www.vulture.com/2017/10/riverdale-premiere-ratings-are-stunning.html.

'Arbitrary Law,' *Twin Peaks*, David Lynch and Mark Frost (Directors), Paramount Home Entertainment, 2007.

Biressi, Anita and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, London: Wallflower Press, 2005.

'Born Perfect,' *National Center for Lesbian Rights*, accessed 10th December 2020, available from: https://www.nclrights.org/our-work/born-perfect/.

Brembilla, Paola and Chiara Checcaglini, '"Iconic and Beyond Reproach": The Socio-Aesthetic Relevance of *Riverdale*,' *ZoneModa Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1S (2020), pp. 39-54.

Bronfen, Elisabeth, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.

Carrie, Brian De Palma (Director), United Artists, 1976.

Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Cvetkovich, Ann, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Edelman, Elijah Adiv, '"Walking While Transgender": Necropolitical Regulations on Trans Feminine Bodies of Colour in the U.S. Nation's Capital,' in *Queer Necropolitics*, ed. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco, London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 172-190.

Ettinger, Bracha, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Faderman, Lillian, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, New York: Penguin, 1992.

Feuer, Jane, 'Melodrama, Serial Form, and Television Today,' *Screen*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1984), pp. 4-17.

Freud, Sigmund, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, New York: Penguin, 2003.

Grosz, Elizabeth, 'Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and Corporeal,' in *Feminine/Masculine and Representation*, ed. Terry Threadgold and Anne Cranny-Francis, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990, pp. 64-74.

---, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Gržinić, Marina and Šefik Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historicization of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art, and Life*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014.

Haake, Katharine, *What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies*, National Council of Teachers of English, 2000.

Hoeveler, Diane Long, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998.

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

---, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.

Lindsey, Shelley Stamp, 'Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty,' *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Winter 1991), pp. 33-44.

Luckhurst, Roger, *The Trauma Question*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2008.

Massumi, Brian, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

Miller, Nicholas E., '"Now That It's Just Us Girls": Transmedial Feminisms from Archie to Riverdale,' *Feminist Media Histories*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2018), pp. 205-226.

Moore, Amber, '"Just How Depraved is this Town?": An Intersectional Interrogation of Feminist Snaps, Slut Shaming, and Sometimes Sisterhood in *Riverdale*'s Rape Culture,' *Feminist Media Studies* (July 2020), pp. 1-16.

Oppel, Richard A., Jr.,'Ohio Teenagers Guilty of Rape That Social Media Brought to Light,' *The New York Times*, 17th March 2013, available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/18/us/teenagers-found-guilty-in-rape-in-steubenville-ohio.html.

Riverdale, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa (Creator), Berlanti Productions, Archie Comics, Warner Bros. Television, and CBS Television Studios, 2017-.

Russo, Gianluca, '"Riverdale" Oversexualizes its Female Characters,' *Teen Vogue*, 12th December 2017, available from: https://www.teenvogue.com/story/riverdale-over-sexualized-teenage-characters.

Schneider, Richard Jr., 'Start of a Decade: "Camp Leaders,"' *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2020), p. 4.

Sontag, Susan, 'Notes on "Camp,"' in *A Partisan Century: Political Writings from Partisan Review*, ed. Edith Kurzweil, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, pp. 232-244.

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me, David Lynch and Mark Frost (Directors), New Line Cinema, 1992.

Westengard, Laura, *Gothic Queer Culture: Marginalized Communities and the Ghosts of Insidious Trauma*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

Wheatley, Helen, *Gothic Television*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.

Williams, Tony, 'Trying to Survive on the Darker Side: 1980s Family Horror,' in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015, pp. 192-208.